


Seahorse

International Sailing

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Reset – Paul Bieker
Prolific – Rod Johnstone
The golden era – Frank Quealey
Pure happiness – Sam Davies
But getting harder – Jérémie Beyou
The long road – Iain Murray



Nothing but trouble
– Uffa Fox

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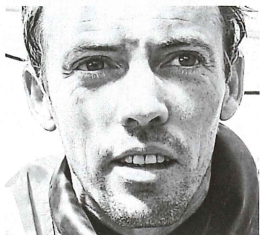
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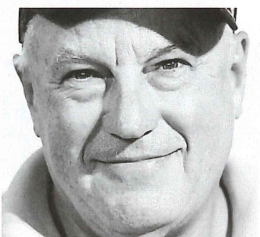
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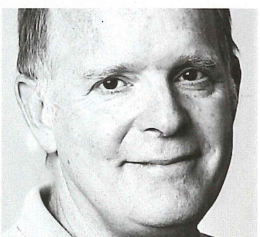
Thomas Ruyant won the last Rhum in the Class40 then borrowed the money to build an Imoca before finding a sponsor. Gritty



Rod Johnstone created a much bigger beast with the success of his little J/24. He also ushered in a new era of modern cruiser-racers



Iain Murray's record in the 18-foot skiffs was finally beaten more than 30 years later – and only by his own young protégé Seve Jarvin



Paul Bieker focused his imagination on the Moths along with an exceptional team. Their early results have been exceptional too



Ian Lipinski is surely a good early bet for the 2024 Vendée Globe? Winner in the Mini 6.50s, winner in the Class40s... and smart

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Commodore's letter

There is quite a Corinthian spirit in UK sailing while we are still amid various virus restrictions. Several clubs in the Solent organising racing for double-handed and household crews spreading an enthusiasm for racing simply to enjoy being back on the water. The biggest event so far, with way over 100 entries, was the JOG race to the Nab Tower which made a great sight as the varied fleet set off from Cowes. I'll wager every boat had a good day despite the tricky shifting breeze. In the oddest way there seems to be a reinvigoration of the bug to go racing. With races being cancelled and postponed in all quarters organisers have been inventive in devising new ways to get enjoyable new events set up in their place.

The RORC have been constantly reviewing the UK laws and guidance, consulting the RYA and taking medical advice to enable us to set up some racing. Distance racing in its widest sense is perhaps the best suited to the current conditions, at least here in the UK. Shoreside facilities are not required, race officer requirements are manageable and the fleet can enjoy a full day out on the water. Perhaps by September there will be some further relaxations but as I write we have



An Italian lifestyle magazine recently described *Yacht A* (in the background) as 'the most beautiful sailing boat in the world'. We say 'you really must have been desperate for the brokerage ad'. And the expedition yacht *Olivia O...* certainly that purposeful bow should cut through the ice, but was that really the only solution? Captain Scott's *Discovery* would do the same thing – sometimes under canvas. Not a pretty sight

concluded that racing overnight for other than double-handed or household groups is neither possible nor sensible. Our August programme therefore concentrates on day-long distance races, with a mini points series for crews of up to six as per the UK government guideline.

We have had further discussions on social distancing and other issues but these are matters for individual boats not for the race organiser. Each boat and their crew configuration is different and as with all other matters of safety it is the ultimate responsibility of the skipper to decide what is appropriate.

This is a long-established principle of yacht racing, inextricably linked to the independent nature of sailing. We feel strongly that as race organisers, while we might remind skippers of guidelines, we should not cross the line into making rules for matters that are much better left to the judgement of the skippers and crews.

Subject to some more relaxations, it is now looking as if September will be a busy month in the Solent with many postponed events hoping to run. I have my fingers firmly crossed for all of those events and wish everyone some good times on the water this summer.

Steven Anderson
Commodore





Prolific

The most broadly successful performance yacht designer of the last 35 or so years has achieved that status through a laser-like ability to lock onto the requirements of a target market and then deliver the ideal product for it – and which also works off the shelf. Carol Cronin unravels the creative force that is Rod Johnstone

We all know the story: a budding yacht designer builds a race-winning boat in his garage, then teams up with his marketing-savvy brother to create a family business – which just entered its fourth decade. So any profile of Rod Johnstone, co-founder of J/Boats, should focus on less well-known details. Childhood, design inspirations, favourite boats?

Seated on the properly distanced cockpit seats of Rod's brand-new J/99, I spent two hours enjoying a wide range of stories – too many to fit in here. There was the time he

fell in the water at six months old – an inauspicious start to a sailing career. The 1970s races he can still recount, tack for tack. Chasing his future (second) wife all the way across the country, just to drag her back to Stonington. Each golden thread led to another worthy tale, because there's much more to this guy than just J/Boats. So, ladies and gentlemen, I give you Rod Johnstone – mostly in his own words.

Childhood sailing

Rod was born in 1937 and spent childhood summers in Stonington – where, after World War II, 'every family had a Lightning'. He claims the home-built Johnstone boat was the heaviest: 'The old boats were fir plywood decks with canvas over them, but you couldn't get regular plywood – it was all used up by the US Navy. So what did my father get? Masonite, which is like three times as heavy! And that's what we sailed on from 1947 until I went away to college.' (Princeton, class of 1958.)

Nevertheless, despite its weight Rod credits that Lightning with instilling an early love of sailing in him and his two brothers. 'My father was so much fun to sail with, because he had the right attitude.

'He was the best sailor around here, but his ego never showed; he was always very humble about it. Environment really influences you a lot when it comes to what you like to do...'

Learning and teaching

Rod majored in history at Princeton, though he says maths might have been the better choice. 'Maths was a total bore to me; that was the problem. My parents always wanted me to be well rounded, so I took that to mean that I was supposed to not be bad in anything. I love studying history but I'm a really slow reader. If I'd been brave, majored in maths, it sure would have been a lot easier.'

As a member of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) Rod spent six months after graduation at a field artillery school in Fort Sill, Oklahoma. 'That's the furthest west I'd ever been until I went out to get Lucia and bring her back to Stonington in 1971. But that's another story...'

When I asked how he met his first wife, Franny, whom he married right after college, he pauses for one of the baritone chuckles that foreshadows another fond memory. 'I was a member of the Tiger-tones, a singing group at Princeton.

'In March of 1957 we were hosting a girls' singing group and I was responsible for making sure they had accommodation somewhere. I also had the option of assigning blind dates. So I did a little advance research, and fixed myself up with my first wife and the mother of all my children!' He laughs again. 'That worked out pretty well.'

After the Army Rod and Franny moved



Left: clearly trying to frighten 'em off... July Seahorse Sailor of the Month and the creator of Virtual Regatta, Philippe Guigne, takes a typically left field path when it comes to crew gear at the J/70 Worlds. It's not so hard to flip a J/24 (above), the same powerful rig and flat bottom hull with small fin that give the boat its sparkling downwind pace and all-round responsiveness can also leave you on your side for a fair while when you do fall over, usually on a fast run (symmetrical chutes, remember). Early J/24s had opening cockpit lockers that drained directly into the hull... and lots of them sank. Later boats were better

DAVID BRANIGAN

to upstate New York where Rod taught history at the Millbrook School. 'I really loved that job. That's where Jeff and Phil [Johnstone] were born.' (Jeff is now president of J/Boats, and Phil is the company's legal adviser.) But now Rod also started fiddling around with boat designs, which made him realise he needed more education. He signed up for the Westlawn School of Yacht Design's correspondence course – though he never officially completed the curriculum. (They would, however, eventually award him an honorary degree.)

Once kid number three was on the way (Al, J/Boats VP and designer), the family moved back to Stonington. Rod ran a brokerage office and they had two daughters, but the marriage broke up in the late 1960s. Then in 1971, at a yacht club party, his sister pointed out a cute girl and suggested he introduce himself. 'I am totally chicken about stuff like that, so I went up and got myself a cup of coffee. She was sitting with her parents, so I said, "Hi, Tony. Hey, Tassie, how you doing?" They weren't about to introduce me. They knew I had five kids... and I wasn't married.'

He soon retreated to his own table, but the very next night – thanks to a boat engine that wouldn't start – Rod and Lucia met up at a cocktail party. After three weeks 'where I didn't let her out of my sight', Lucia (with two kids from her own previous marriage) went back to her

assistant headteacher's job in California. 'I said, "I'm coming out to bring you back to Stonington on 15 October."

'She didn't say for sure that she was coming [back], 'cause I don't think she was sure that I was going to come out there. But I just kept making plans, told her when my plane was gonna arrive.' They married in November 1971, three months after that first yacht club sighting.

Honeymooning on a 505

In Bermuda after the wedding Rod spotted a brand-new Parker 505 and talked the owner into inviting them out. First, the guy Rod describes as 'an archetype of an RAF pilot, handsome guy with a moustache' invites Lucia to put on the trapeze harness. 'She takes off with this sailor and I was thinking, "Am I making a huge mistake here? I'm standing on the dock and my new wife is going off with this handsome Englishman!"' After the 505 returned the owner then crewed for Rod – a test. 'He said, "You'll do, you can take the boat."' Lucia had never been on a trapeze before, but she took right to it.

Back home they bought a cheap kit boat and drove it to regattas. There were plenty of husband-wife teams in the 505 class, though probably no others with a blended family of seven kids. Rod says they had a wonderful time but were always too small to be competitive.

At one of their first regattas they capsized in very cold water – but, thanks to brand-new wetsuits, could self-rescue and continue racing. 'But on the next leg the race committee came out and said, "We'll give you your points for last." All these years later Rod's voice still conveys a potent mix of disbelief and disgust.

Finishing last was not in Rod's DNA, so they sold the 505 and bought a 470 – but now they were too heavy for the top of that fleet. After a very hot and light CORK Regatta (and a bad gybe that prompted Rod to call Lucia an 'elephant'), 'We're all taking our boats apart, everybody smiling and having a good time, like they do at regattas.

'Lucia's smiling too, but between gritted teeth she tells me, "Rodney, I'm never going to get on this goddamn fucking boat again!" Rod admits now he was privately pleased – and quickly signed on 14-year-old, 90lb Jeff as crew.

Father and son did well together: 'The most memorable sailing events were when my kids were my crew.' But Lucia still wanted to race too, so Rod decided to build a boat they could compete on as a family. They launched their little 24-footer *Ragtime* in May 1976 and immediately started winning; when someone asked to buy it Rod realised other families wanted to sail together too. Then brother Bob came sailing, and the rest is J/Boats history.



Launched in 1992, Johnstone's brilliant J/80 was the first A-sail sportboat and thrived from day one. In countries like France and in particular Spain the J/80 remains as competitive as any comparable one-design right up to Olympic level. In the last few years it has enjoyed another surge in popularity, ironically on the back of the success of the J/70: the J/80 is cheaper in the used-boat market, better shorthanded and in rough weather, faster upwind and less tricky to sail therefore less 'crew-critical' for Corinthian sailors. This is Vendée Globe skipper Morgan Lagraviere's team at Spi Ouest on Safran – which later grew into an Imoca of the same name.

Early designs

Before *Ragtime* Rod had already designed 'a couple of small boats'. First he reminisces about a 9ft dinghy that he built with 10-year-old Al. 'That's the boat Al started sailing, and he won a few races. It swept away in a storm off our dock; who knows where it went, but it wasn't going to sink because it had so much flotation!'

Next, he mentions an 11-footer that 'might call to be loosely classified as a Moth', designed while he was teaching at Millbrook. 'The building of that boat is what made me realise I needed to take a course. I won't say too much more about it; it sailed perfectly well, but looked like hell and I knew that I wasn't doing it right. I knew what I wanted; I just had to learn to draw the lines of a boat.'

Erasers, calculators, planimeter

Early on Rod says, 'I went through a lot of erasers. It was all pencil drawings. No computers, not even a hand calculator – not until after I'd designed the J/24. I think one of the reasons I did so well was I could do a lot of that stuff in my head. Everybody else was on their slide rules.'

His most useful tool was a gift – and a piece of history. 'My first wife's mother gave me a planimeter; it was her father's, and he'd been an engineer. Crosby Steam Gauge and Valve Company, 1888, it says right on it. I didn't even understand what it was until I started taking the Westlawn course and they said, "You've got to have one of these because it makes everything so easy." This one was really sophisticated;

you could read the results in either inches and feet, fractions, or...' his voice drops, reverently, into a bass register: 'millimetres. It was the key instrument to get the areas of irregular enclosures. Now they've got electronic planimeters... AutoCAD basically.'

When I ask how long it took to design *Ragtime* Rod shakes his head. 'Many years. I actually built a model, 24in long, in 1965. I hollowed it out and made a sailing model. Guess who I made it for?' Jeff, 'I guess.'

He nods, grinning. 'And he probably doesn't even remember!'

Design process

For any new design Rod starts with 'how long the waterline is going to be. For the J/24 I wanted something that was as big as I could build in my garage – and at least 23ft 9in because that was the minimum length for entering the Off Soundings Yacht Club's races!

'It's a numbers game,' he continues. 'You can't just eyeball it, right? You can't. Guys used to start with a shape they would do by eye, but at some point somebody has to determine how the boat's going to float and visualise the three-dimensional shape. Otherwise it's going to take you a lot longer than it should. The most important thing is to know how long the waterline is going to be, plus what the maximum section of the hull is going to be.'

'Just think of the boat going through the water,' he continues. 'The thing that the water has to get around. How is the water going to get there most efficiently, and then how can it get away most efficiently?

What's the wake?' Sailing well upwind was his first priority, because 'a barn door with a bedsheet on a pole will sail downwind'.

The next decision is 'what kind of heel angle are you going to tolerate? And when you heel over, your whole hull has to have fewer wave-making characteristics. Wide-ass boats that go around the world, they're not designed to go upwind – and they don't. They go like hell, but they don't go upwind. So you have to decide the variables.' He shrugs. 'That's how I design, anyway. For me it's easy. I've always figured that out from my experience sailing.'

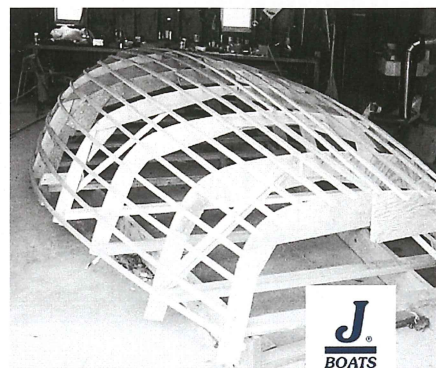
I ask how long it took to design a new model, and Rod has to think about that – out loud. 'I could design something quick and dirty and have it to you by... maybe not tomorrow, but pretty close. If I don't have to please anybody else they go a lot quicker. All the research... if I were doing nothing else I could probably do it in four months. Before computers, more like six months. The lofting and the drawing so somebody can build it, that takes a lot of time. I spent three weeks on my hands and knees to loft the J/30 in 1977.'

Favourite design

Forty of Rod's designs have been built since J/Boats started. Asked for his favourite, he quickly names the J/105, because it's simple and can be raced well and cruised well. 'You can just handle it with fewer people.'

'That's what really prompted the asymmetric spinnaker,' cause people were complaining on the J/35s they had to have 10 people on the rail to be competitive.'

JEAN MARIE LIOT/DPPi



A picture that was worth much more than 1,000 words. Rod Johnstone looks bemused as what would turn out to be the prototype J/24 – *Ragtime* – goes into the water in 1976 having been completed in the confines of the family garage. The design was a bit of a spin-off from the 1/4 tonners of the day but without concessions to the IOR rating rule. Therefore it was lighter, stiffer and plain faster than its more ‘sophisticated’ cousins and in spite of the free-range approach it won a remarkable 15 of its first 17 races. More than 5,300 J/24s would eventually be delivered. J/Boats continue to enjoy widespread handicap success, particularly under IRC, with a bonus over a one-off that not only do you live more comfortably onboard but there is a wider used boat market for when you’re done

The advent of carbon tubing then made the retractable sprit possible, he adds. ‘Made out of aluminium or wood or fibreglass, it would be just too much weight.’

The 105 started the J/Sprit revolution, but the original priority was price. In the early 1990s a US tax on boats over \$100,000 had put a major dent in the new boat market. ‘We definitely had to come up with our luxury-tax beater.’ What turned the boat into one of J/Boats’ bestsellers, though, was that asymmetric spinnaker. ‘You could race with half the number of people, that’s what really sold it.’

A harder sell was the PHRF committees, who thought the new asymmetric spinnakers should be the same size as symmetricals... ‘You needed a 20 per cent bigger area to have the same efficiency as a symmetrical chute. You get more efficiency reaching, and not as much running. It took a while to convince them we weren’t trying to hornswoggle them.’

After years of dealing with local handicapping Rod has developed a theory. ‘If you’re really a good sailor you’re better off having a well-established production boat with a rating that they can’t possibly change. Right now that’s the best boat for PHRF racing.’

The last J/105 Rod owned was a 2008 boat that he and Lucia cruised to Maine. Add a boom tent, open the hatches and Rod claims 7ft headroom, ‘for two people that worked really well. It’s a great sailboat.’

The only reason he hasn’t bought another one is the class restriction on professionals. But as he’s explaining he realises: ‘I’m actually not a professional any more!’ (He stepped away from a paid J/Boats

position in 2015, though he still consults.) I could almost see the thought-cloud forming above his trademark wide-brimmed hat.

Regrets

Even with so much success Rod still has a few regrets. He designed an incredible 42 12 Metres for the America’s Cup, but ‘not a single one ever got built, and I never published anything. I wish I could have been a part of that’.

He also wishes he could have been more involved in the Whitbread/Volvo Race. The closest he got was working on a one-design class ahead of the 1993 race. ‘The idea was to build eight boats, and Peter Blake was going to put the teams together and put them through their paces. He was one impressive guy... so knowledgeable, and very good at managing people. You could just tell by sitting in the same room.’

‘Peter let me have all his wind matrices from the 1989 race, when he won on *Steinlager 2*. But we never got to build it. In 1991 there was a recession... also the luxury tax. Too bad, because it would have been great fun. It was going to be like a big J/70, without the lifting keel; structure built around a frame for the keel, lead on the bottom. We even had talks about whether we should make the sprit retractable.’

When I ask what he’s most proud of, he assumes I’m still talking about boat designs and runs down a list. ‘The J/90, that was an incredible boat. I owned mine longer than any other J/Boat, five years. It was fun to sail and we had lots of adventures! The other designs I’d be the proudest of are the J/35, J/44, J/80. And, of course, the 160.’

I rephrase the question: how about life-

wise? And then I spoon-feed him the most predictable answer: building a family company. ‘No, take one step backwards,’ he says firmly, holding up a hand like a stop sign. ‘Just building a family. That’s what I’m proudest of, if you’re talking about everything. I’ve been lucky in a lot of ways,’ he continues. ‘I’m lucky because I love sailing with all my kids. Even my daughter Pam, who was never really into sailing, asked me recently, “Dad, when are you going to take me sailing?” He laughs. ‘We all have a lot of fun together.’

Next adventure

Two hours go by in a flash, and as we wind up our conversation Rod checks the dock for his nephew, Clay Burkhalter. Clay (an offshore veteran) is prepping the J/99 for an offshore adventure to Bermuda, to deliver an owner to his 65-footer that got stuck there. Rod names a fourth crew, who will help bring the boat back; ‘Then Clay and I will sail this boat back.’ A Bermuda 4-2, I joke. ‘Yeah, a 4-2 is much more fun than a 1-2.’

‘Also, when you can pick your weather between here and Bermuda, that’s always nice.’ He pauses until he’s sure he has my full attention, then adds: ‘I never get tired of this. That’s why I got this boat.’

As I turn the recorder off and we stand up from our cockpit seats Rod’s still sharing memories – even though it’s time to go and my brain is full. ‘You should write a book,’ I tell him. ‘You underestimate your influence on the sport!’ Because there’s definitely a lot more to Rod Johnstone than a 24-footer that barely squeezed out through a standard garage door.

And all those designs that followed. □